
**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

Landmark/District: **Foggy Bottom Historic District** (x) Agenda
Address: **916 25th Street, NW** () Consent

Meeting Date: **February 23, 2012** (x) Addition
Case Number: **12-203**

Staff Reviewer: **Tim Dennée**

The applicants, expediter Cathie Harrison and architects Studio Crowley Hall, agents for owners Roberto Izurieta and Paul Quirk, request the Board's review of a concept to construct a roof addition atop a two-story, brick rowhouse erected in 1885. This was part of a speculative development by builders Danenhower & Son that included the contemporaneous alley dwellings on Hughes Mews, and it reflects the typically modest rental housing that was available in the once blue-collar, industrial neighborhood of Foggy Bottom. Although this row consists of only four houses, it continues two similar rows that stand to the south and faces homes of a similar height across the street.

The drawings indicate that this would be a frame addition set about ten feet rearward of the plane of the façade. The sightline study and the photo mock-ups indicate that the addition would be readily visible from 25th Street, a fact that is apparent merely from observing this row (one can see over the fairly shallow houses at an elevation that is low enough that no roof addition could be invisible from street level).

The drawings indicate the maximum height as nine feet, atop a roof structure that would have to be removed and reframed, of course, to support it. Some of the addition would be concealed behind a front parapet. This height is, of course, a best-case scenario, assuming the most compact possible floor and roof assemblies, no rooftop mechanical, and a complete lack of side parapets (plus construction perfectly complying with the drawings, assuming no errors or measurement nor unforeseen circumstances).

The drawings are no more than a massing study, which is probably a wise recognition that a rooftop addition atop a two-story rowhouse is a yes/no proposition, details aside.

As stated in the HPRB-adopted guidance to applicants, the Board "generally requires that new roof decks not be visible from surrounding streets or public sidewalks so as not to alter the character or appearance of the building or streetscape."

Adding vertically to a historic building is generally discouraged as such additions typically alter significant features, such as its roof line, height, relationship with

surrounding buildings, and overall form and mass[ing]. Additions on top of a building can sometimes be achieved when they are not visible from street views, do not result in the removal or alteration of important character-defining features of the building or streetscape, and are compatible with their context.... Under most circumstances, roof additions that are visible from a public street are not appropriate, as they would alter an historic building's height, mass, design composition, cornice line, roof, and its relationship to surrounding buildings and streetscape—all of which are important character-defining features that are protected for historic property.

Although the Board has been less discouraging of roof additions on some types of large buildings that were historically more commonly altered with a penthouse, it has strongly discouraged additions atop more modest buildings where the alteration would be proportionally greater, more prominently visible, and less typical of the building type.

While the most problematic type of roof addition proposal has been one that would destroy a prominently visible pitched roof that is a character-defining feature of a building, the second most problematic class includes both low, freestanding buildings—which would not admit the concealment of a roof addition from any angle—and rowhouses, where an inappropriate alteration could affect not just the subject property but the appearance and historic integrity of the entire row. Of this latter type, the Board has recommend that partial additional stories *not* be built at 1436 T Street NW, 1745 Swann Street NW, 516 Groff Court NE, 1242 U Street SE, 816-818 Rhode Island Avenue NW, 438 Ridge Street NW and 2407-2409 I Street NW, to name only a few, plus numerous examples of other low buildings that are not parts of a row. The architects in the present case have worked on a few rowhouse projects in the Mount Pleasant Historic District, successfully observing the standard that roof additions not be visible from the street.

The present application consists mostly of photographs of the historic district, either depicting the proposal's immediate context or properties that have structures on their roof—the implication being either that such structures provide the neighborhood's predominant character/context *or* that other, similar things have been approved previously and thus, so should the present application.

The Foggy Bottom Historic District was designated in 1986, principally to protect the handful of modest rows that comprise the neighborhood. Even then, defending against the phenomenon of “pop-ups” was one of the reasons designation proponents submitted a historic district nomination. Several of the present rooftop structures pictured in the application actually pre-date the historic designation. These include the gable roof on the non-contributing building at 935 25th Street, a partial fourth story on a non-contributing house at 2531 I Street, partial third stories at 2514 and 2516 I Street, and two stair pop-ups at 2407 and 2409 I Street.¹

¹ The first two being non-contributing, they would today receive a lesser standard of review than for historic buildings. The gable on 935 25th is debatable, because it stands out from the rest of the row, but it would probably have to be approved today, even if discouraged. On the other hand, the addition at 2531 I Street is quite compatible with the underlying modernist house. The rowhouse at 2516 I Street has had a “makeover” which incorporated the rooftop addition into a large rear addition and re-siding. It and 2514 I Street were cited in 2002 as evidence as to why a permit should *not* be issued for a similar proposal for 2520 I Street. And as unsightly as the two rooftop

Of the additions approved (more or less) by the Historic Preservation Review Board, 2512 I Street is *not* a rooftop addition, but rather a three-story addition behind the original house, which screens the higher rear addition from across the street.²

So, the only addition comparable to the proposed and constructed since 1986 stands at nearby 912 25th Street. About this structure, it can only be said that it was a dreadful mistake. Built two decades ago and reviewed at a time when such proposals were less numerous, former staff may have been convinced that it would not be visible, or minimally so, although it seems difficult to understand that in retrospect.³ Even if not obvious then, it certainly is now. Copying such a mistake, rather than learning from it and resolving not to repeat it, would seem foolish consistency indeed.

The instances cited above demonstrate that the exceptions prove the rule. It is the repetition of this tiny historic district's predominant building type, the rowhouse, that defines the neighborhood's character, and not the rooftop jumble on a handful of the units. It is imperative that the Board defend the former against the latter. To support third stories on the historic rowhouses would cross a pretty important line, taking the difficult issue of rooftop additions farther than it has gone. Expected to be reasonably consistent and not capricious, the Board could be opening up thousands more of the District of Columbia's historic buildings to similar, prominent alterations of height and massing, leaving the notion of some degree of setback as the only remaining rule.

The staff recommends that the Board not support the concept, as it is incompatible with the character of the subject property and the historic district and, therefore, inconsistent with the purposes of the preservation law.

structures at 2407-2409 I Street may be, their replacement with a larger, partial third story was also rejected, as incompatible with the character of the row.

² The compatibility of higher rear additions, for rows or abutting or isolated houses, are always worth questioning, but the mere construction of a building at three stories in this historic district is not inherently incompatible because there is some variety of heights. A new three-story house on Hughes Mews was supported by the Board several years ago. Rooftop additions are among the trickiest projects, because in the field they will frequently, even typically deviate from the drawings, almost always on the higher side, because of unanticipated issues or carelessness—which is all the more reason they should be discouraged and handled with the utmost care.

³ Once built, the law could not require that subsequent owners remove it. Consequently, a few years ago, the Board approved a reconstruction of the structure necessitated by poor initial construction, and managed to lower its profile somewhat.